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ABSTRACT

This document is comprised of the two issues published in volume 1 (1999) of "Parent News Offline," a newsletter of the National Parent Information Network (NPIN), designed to introduce those without Internet access to the activities and information available through NPIN. The spring 1999 issue contains the following articles: (1) "Child Care: How Does It Affect Children?" (Peggy Patten); (2) "He Has a Summer Birthday: The Kindergarten Entrance Age Dilemma" (Sandra Crosser); (3) "Student Selection for Gifted/Talented Programs" (Sandra Berger); and (4) "Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools" (Anne S. Robertson). The fall 1999 issue contains the following articles: (1) "Simplifying Your Holidays" (Amy Aidman); (2) "Parent-Teacher Conferences: Suggestions for Parents" (Ann-Marie Clark); (3) "Children's Extracurricular Activities" (Peggy Patten); and (4) "Applying for College Financial Aid." Both issues also list recent publications from NPIN and the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, as well as other resources. (KB)

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Anne S. Robertson, Ed.

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Parent News Offline

Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring 1999

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ERIC

Child Care: How Does It Affect Children?

Peggy Patten

Parents who use NPIN's information services frequently ask us questions about the impact of child care on children. Considering the statistics on child care utilization, this same question is likely asked by countless others as well. The Children's Defense Fund (1999) reports that 13 million children—including 6 million infants and toddlers—are in child care every day.

What do we know about the quality of care arrangements and outcomes for children in those arrangements?

Over the past 15 years, a number of studies have examined the effects of child care quality on children's development. The encouraging news from the various studies is that a significant correlation exists between program quality and outcomes for children (Frede, 1995). Outcomes related to quality in child care include cooperative play, sociability, creativity, ability to solve social conflicts, self-control, and language and cognitive development. Early findings from a longitudinal study supported by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD, 1997) indicate that high-quality child care in the early years is associated with better mother-child interaction.

In their synthesis of the research on child care quality, Love, Schochet, and Meckstroth (1996) state that the "preponderance of evidence supports the conclusion of a substantial positive relationship between child care quality and child well being" (p. 3).

The encouraging news . . . is that a significant correlation exists between program quality and outcomes for children.

What constitutes quality in child care?

Child care is not a single, monolithic entity. It takes many shapes and forms and has many features. Much of what has been published previously about quality in child care has focused on structural features, such as the number of children per adult, group sizes, and caregiver/teacher qualifications (Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips, 1989; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1996). As research has become more sophisticated, it is clear that these structural features alone do not determine quality, but rather they provide the context in which good-quality practices are more likely to occur. Features such as the responsiveness of the caregiver, individualization of care, language used in the classroom, and the appropriateness of learning activities are the key dimensions of quality that affect

Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (CCR&Rs) can help parents choose high-quality child care.

outcomes for children (Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center, 1997; Love, Schochet, & Meckstroth, 1996).

These more human dimensions of care are more difficult for parents to observe and interpret. Child care programs and other support organizations such as Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (CCR&Rs) can assist parents in the child care selection process (Mann & Thornburg, 1998).

What are some other variables influencing the effects of child care?

In her article "How Do Child Care and Maternal Employment Affect Children?," Ellen Galinsky (1986) talks about three experiences in addition to the quality of child care that make a positive or negative difference for children:

1. the mother's or the family's attitude toward working,
2. the conditions of the mother's and father's jobs, and
3. other stressful events within the family.

What do these research findings mean for parents faced with child care decisions?

As with all decisions related to parenting, the decision to use child care should be given serious thought. A few questions to consider include the following:

Is your decision to use child care consistent with your and your family's beliefs about what's good for children? Do other family members support your decision to either stay home or work outside the home? Do you have support at your workplace to balance your roles as parent and employee? Do you have access to resources to help you select and maintain a good child care arrangement?

The above points assume that there is a choice to use or not use child care. Many families do not have this option and must work out of economic necessity. For these families, it is imperative that high-quality and affordable child care options exist.

Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (CCR&Rs) exist in communities around the United States to assist parents in many of these areas. CCR&Rs have resources on how to select a high-quality child care arrangement. They also often have resources on ways to maintain good relationships with child care programs and on how to talk to your employer about implementing family-supportive benefits. To find your local CCR&R, contact the national Child Care Aware office at 800-424-2246.

OR

Adapted from a May/June 1999 online *Parent News* article (http://npin.org/pnews/1999/pnew599/int599a.html).

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He Has a Summer Birthday: The Kindergarten Entrance Age Dilemma

Sandra Crosser

David would be 5 in July. Full of enthusiasm, he confidently underwent spring kindergarten screening. The school psychologist explained that David completed the screening with average and above-average skills, but he had a summer birthday and he was a male. The psychologist and the gym teacher agreed that David would be more successful in school if he were to postpone kindergarten for 1 year.

David's experience has been repeated over and over by many children across the country. Educators are commonly recommending that children born during the summer months be given an extra year to mature so that they will not suffer from the academic disadvantages of being among the youngest children in a class. Terms such as "academic red-shirting" and "graying of the kindergarten" have been invented to describe the practice and effects of holding children back from kindergarten (Bracey, 1989; Suro, 1992).

Small-scale studies of limited geographic areas suggest that delayed kindergarten entrance involves anywhere from 9% to 64% of the eligible kindergarten population (Meisels, 1992). However, data collected for the large-scale National Household Education Survey (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 1997) indicated that 9% of the first- and second-graders had been held back from kindergarten. Surveyed parents reported that children who had delayed kindergarten entrance 1 year were most likely to have been male (64%), white (73%), and born between July and December (70%). Compared to children born in the first quarter of the year, children born in the summer months were twice as likely to have delayed kindergarten entrance 1 year after they were first eligible.

Substantial numbers of parents and educators believe that children born in the summer months will gain an academic advantage if kindergarten entrance is delayed 1 year. Is it a disadvantage to be among the youngest, rather than the oldest, in a kindergarten class?

What Does the Research Reveal?

A review of the relevant literature reveals that few studies have been undertaken to examine whether or not children with summer birthdays do better academically when they postpone kindergarten entrance 1 year. Problems also arise because some of the research often cited in support of delayed entrance is poorly designed, has focused on children with learning disabilities or on early entrants, has relied on subjective parent or teacher reports, or has not looked specifically at children born during the summer months.

The related research is meager and somewhat contradictory. In general, studies indicate that the youngest children in a class may score slightly below the oldest children in a class, but any differences tend to be small and may be transitory (Morrison, Griffith, & Alberts, 1997; Cameron & Wilson, 1990; Kinard & Reinherz, 1986; Smith & Shepard, 1987; NCES, 1997).

The sparsity of evidence related specifically to summer-born children prompted an investigation comparing the academic achievement of two groups of children born in June, July, August, or September: those who entered kindergarten just after turning 5 and those who were held out 1 year and entered kindergarten at age 6 (Crosser, 1991). Each child who delayed entrance was matched with a child of like intelligence who had not delayed entrance. Boys were matched with boys, and girls with girls.

All of the children took standardized achievement tests during fifth or sixth grade. Those test scores were used to compare the achievement of summer-born, held-out children to that of summer-born children who had entered school on time.

Results of the study indicated that, given similar levels of intelligence, boys with summer birth dates tended to be advantaged academically by postponing kindergarten entrance 1 year. That advantage was greatest in the area of reading. Reading scores for females and math scores for both males and females did not show significant statistical differences.

Results of such small-scale studies need to be replicated before educators will be able to make informed recommendations about optimum kindergarten entrance age. There is no clear-cut evidence that delaying kindergarten for the youngest entrants will provide some magical academic advantage. Because there is so little entrance age evidence, and because some of that evidence is conflicting, there does not appear to be a strong academic basis for delaying kindergarten entrance for summer-born children.

A responsible physician would not recommend any treatment that had not been scientifically tested and retested for effectiveness. She would need to know the specific symptoms for which the treatment was effective. She would need

to know the success rate of the treatment and what complicating side effects and interactions were possible before prescribing the treatment.

Responsible educators also have a need to know the facts before recommending treatment for a child whose only symptoms are being born in July and being male. Nevertheless, the reality is that both teachers and parents are accepting the idea that delaying school entrance for summer birth date children is sound practice.

How Does Holding Out Affect the Kindergarten Experience?

It has been reported that affluent parents tend to hold out their summer-born children more often than do low socioeconomic status parents (Meisels, 1992). If that is the case, then children who may be at academic risk from factors associated with poverty face the additional hurdle of being compared to advantaged children who are 12 to 15 months older. We should expect that the economically disadvantaged children may be outperformed by their classmates who are both chronologically and developmentally their seniors.

In the real-life kindergarten classroom, the youngest children may appear to be immature and unready to tackle the tasks that their significantly older classmates find challenging and intriguing. As the curriculum and academic expectations increase to meet the needs of the 6-year-old children, there is a real danger that the kindergarten program will become developmentally inappropriate for the very young children it is meant to serve.

Did David's Parents Make the Right Decision?

David is 15 now. When he was 13, he towered above his classmates as he walked through the halls. The school desks just didn't fit his 6'3" body, and many of his teachers assumed that he must have been retained since he was older than the other students. When asked what grade he is in, David always makes it a point to explain that he started kindergarten late.

But David is well liked by students and teachers. He moved into both puberty and formal operational thought sooner than his classmates, earning their admiration. Academically, David does average and above-average work with minimal effort.

Did David's parents make the right decision in holding him out from kindergarten? They don't know. They will probably never know, but David thinks he knows the answer.

Conclusion

Academic achievement is only one piece of the school entrance age puzzle. The child's physical, social, and emotional development are key pieces, as well. It would seem to be the course of wisdom to consider the whole child in all of his or her aspects when making decisions about school entrance. The answers are not simple. They are further complicated because each child is different biologically and emotionally. Each child brings his own special characteristics with him as he lives and works through his unique life experiences.

The counsel of educators can bring about life-changing events in a young child's world. Blanket recommendations to hold back one group of children only serve to change who will be part of the youngest group. As educators, we must resist the urge to follow the unfounded advice of those who would recommend uniform practices that would exclude any group of children from our schools. Educators must consider the individual child as we continue to build a stronger knowledge base upon which to make entrance age decisions.

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Student Selection for Gifted/Talented Programs

Sandra Berger

States and school districts have a wide variety of policies and use a wide variety of instruments, screening mechanisms, and procedures to identify gifted students. Each state, and in some cases each school district, establishes the criteria for identification of students as gifted. The variety of policies explains why a youngster might be found to be eligible for gifted services in one school district but not considered eligible for services in another district.

Parents and educators usually find it helpful to understand their state policy and to obtain any state or local documents that describe the gifted population or programs and services for the gifted.

To locate information on identification/screening procedures used by school districts, contact any or all of the following:

- The person responsible for gifted education in your state. A list is available on the Council for Exceptional Children's Web site (http://www.cec.sped.org/fact/stateres.htm).
- A state advocacy group or a local advocacy group. Local advocacy groups might be found by asking the state group or your child's school, or by searching citizen testimony before the school board.
- Local school district offices that are responsible for student assessment—for example, the counseling or student services department. Ask what tests and procedures are used to select students for gifted programs.

Many school districts use standardized tests to identify gifted students. Other items included in broad screening for a gifted program are parent and teacher checklists or recommendations, peer/student recommendations, a child's school work in a portfolio, and other checklists or rating scales of behavioral characteristics.

For more information, parents can contact NPIN or the following organizations:

- ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education, Council for Exceptional Children, 1920 Association Dr., Reston, VA 20191, telephone: 800-328-0272, TTY: 703-264-9449, email: ericec@cec.sped.org, Internet: http://ericec.org
- National Association for Gifted Children Internet: http://www.nagc.org

OR

Adapted from a May/June 1999 online *Parent News* article (http://npin.org/pnews/1999/pnew599/feat599.html).

Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools

Anne S. Robertson

A recently released guide to safe schools is available through the U.S. Department of Education and is located at http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/OSEP/earlywrn.html. Kevin Dywer, president-elect of the National Association of School Psychologists, helped develop the guide along with the U.S. Departments of Justice, Education, and Health and Human Services. Dywer suggests that the guide can contribute to developing a nurturing school climate for all children.

Dywer also indicates that the guide should be helpful in identifying warning signs of potentially violent students. The goal is not to label students, but to provide educators with some of the warning signs so that they can intervene quickly with certain children while developing a nurturing school climate for all children. Some of the signs of a student in distress include the following:

- social withdrawal
- harboring extreme feelings of isolation and peer rejection
- expressing thoughts about violence in writings, drawings, and poetry
- feeling persecuted or picked on
- performing poorly or showing little interest in school
- expressing uncontrolled anger
- having a previous history of discipline problems
- expressing intense prejudice
- using alcohol or drugs
- affiliating with a gang
- making a specific and detailed threat to use violence

Source: Fox, J., & Cahir, W. J. (1998, August 28). Watch students for signs of violence, guide says. *Education Daily, 31*(166), pp. 1-2.

OR

Adapted from a November/December 1998 online *Parent News* article (http://npin.org/pnews/1998/pnew1198/int1198a.html).

About NPIN and *Parent News Offline*

The National Parent Information Network (NPIN) was created in late 1993 to collect and disseminate information about high-quality resources for parents by the U.S. Department of Education, which supports NPIN through the ERIC system. NPIN is now one of the largest noncommercial collections of parenting information on the Internet (http://npin.org). In addition to its Web site, NPIN offers question-answering services via a toll-free telephone number (800-583-4135) and by email through the AskERIC service (askeric@askeric.org).

Another service provided by NPIN is *Parent News*, an Internet magazine that focuses on topics of interest to parents and professionals who work with parents. Many of the articles featured in *Parent News* have been developed in direct response to frequently asked questions. *Parent News Offline* has been created in response to requests for a newsletter that would introduce those without Internet access to the activities and information available through NPIN. We encourage you to share both our online and offline resources, including ERIC/EECE Digests, with parenting groups, schools, and community initiatives.

Recent Publications

Several new ERIC/EECE and NPIN publications are available that will be of interest to parents and those who work with them:

- *A to Z: The Early Childhood Educator's Guide to the Internet* (Rev. 1998, Cat. #214, $10) describes hundreds of Internet sites and electronic mailing lists on early childhood education and child development.

ERIC/EECE Digests (free two-page reports):

- *Video Games: Research, Ratings, Recommendations*
- *Parenting Style and Its Correlates*
- *Television Violence: Content, Context, and Consequences*
- *If an Adolescent Begins to Fail in School, What Can Parents and Teachers Do?*
- *When Retention Is Recommended, What Should Parents Do?*

To order ERIC/EECE publications, call 800-583-4135. Free materials can be ordered online at http://ericeece.org/digorder.html

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Parent News Offline

Vol. 1, No. 2, Fall 1999

In This Issue

Simplifying Your Holidays

ERIC/EECE Parent Handout: Parent-Teacher Conferences: Suggestions for Parents

Children's Extracurricular Activities

Applying for College Financial Aid

About NPIN and *Parent News Offline*

Recent Publications

Simplifying Your Holidays

Amy Aidman

Halloween is over. Even before the last of the candy is gone and the costumes are stored away, the pre-holiday media advertising blitz is ringing in the Christmas gift-giving season. Often the December holidays, in addition to being joyful, can be stressful for parents and children. Pervasive holiday advertising with the pressure it exerts on families to "buy, buy, buy" can add to holiday stress. The season can also cause discomfort for families who do not participate in Christmas traditions and who may find that their children feel left out and alienated from the mainstream culture at this time of year. This article addresses some of the problems that can occur for children and families as a result of the media blitz around the holidays. Suggestions are offered to help parents control their children's desire for consumer products, to make the holidays meaningful for all participating families, and to make them less problematic for nonparticipating families.

Holidays and the Pervasiveness of Advertising

The holiday season can be a time when parents and children tap into the values of generosity and sacrifice for the common good. However, in our society, it has become a time that emphasizes materialism and consumerism. Along with Christmas, the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah—originally a minor celebration—has become, for some, an occasion for overconsumption. Some people make the claim that consumerism has practically become our national religion.

For the year 2000, it is estimated that children will spend $35.6 billion of their own money and that they will directly influence close to $290 billion in parental spending.

A large percentage of retailers' profits are made during November and December, and children are directing a great deal of the spending. For Christmas of 1998, Professor James McNeal, a researcher of children's consumer behavior, predicted that $38 billion of the money spent would be based on decisions made by children ages 4-12. Thirty billion dollars would be spent by parents, $4.5 billion by children using their own money, and another $3 billion by grandparents ("Kidfluence," 1998). For the year 2000, it is estimated that children will spend $35.6 billion of their own money and that they will directly influence close to $290 billion in parental spending (McNeal, 1999).

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Children's Understanding of Advertising

Children of different ages understand advertising differently. Very young children do not innately know the difference between program content and advertising content. Until children can understand that someone is trying to persuade them to buy something and that the advertising claims might not be true, they cannot be skeptical about advertising. This understanding is likely to occur around the age of 8 or 9. The understanding of the persuasive intent of ads increases throughout the elementary years. However, simply understanding the selling intent of advertising does not create skepticism. In order to develop a critical perspective on advertising, children need guidance.

Suggestions for Parents of Preschool Children

Exercising parental control over what children see and hear in the mass media is easiest when children are young. Strategies for dealing with advertising with very young children include:

- limit or even prohibit exposure to commercial television,
- watch television with children,
- teach children to recognize and to mute commercials,
- record programs on a VCR and teach children to fast forward through the ads,
- talk with children about advertising by pointing out the selling intent, and
- take advantage of disappointments—if a purchased product does not live up to advertising claims, this disappointment can be an opportunity to discuss advertising with a child.

Suggestions for Parents of Elementary School Children

As children enter school, it becomes more difficult for parents to control exposure to advertising. Along with the greater contact with the outside world that comes with learning to read, children want to watch the programs they hear their peers discussing, have the same toys, and wear similar clothes. While it may be more difficult to control what children see at this stage, parents can:

- continue to limit exposure to commercial television by amount and content viewed,
- discuss advertising strategies with children,
- discuss the interrelated nature of television advertising and product spin-offs,
- discourage children from being "walking ads" by buying clothing and accessories that display product names,
- help children to understand advertising by involving them in producing their own commercials, and
- get involved in keeping advertising out of the schools.

Parents can also create games that involve critiquing ads. The Children's Advertising Review Unit (CARU) of the Better Business Bureau offers suggestions for a number of such games ("Advertising and Your Child," n.d.).

What about Those Who Do Not Celebrate Christmas?

For children and families outside of the mainstream holiday traditions, the season can be problematic. These families can establish their own traditions around the season and decide how much they want to join in with the festivities and gift giving without compromising their own religious or cultural identities. Traditions that deal with family togetherness, giving, and reflecting on who we are are especially important for children at this time of year, when it seems as though everyone else has something special going on. When children are left out of a cultural mainstay, such as Christmas, there should be something there to fill the void, something that helps them develop security in their own family's customs, culture, and identity.

The holidays can provide a special time for children and families to enjoy being together and to affirm the values and the qualities that are at the heart of their religion or other belief system. Working out alternative ways of giving can help parents find ways to make the holidays meaningful and fun while avoiding the traps of holiday stress and overconsumption.

Adapted from a November/December 1999 online *Parent News* article (http://npin.org/pnews/1999/pnew1199/spot1199a.html).

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Parent-Teacher Conferences: Suggestions for Parents

Ann-Marie Clark

Parent-teacher conferences sometimes become a cause for concern for everyone involved—children, parents, and teachers. Children just beginning their school experience may be wary of the idea of parents and teachers talking about them behind closed doors. Parents may feel uncomfortable about going inside their child's classroom, sitting in small chairs, and listening to reports of their child's conduct and class work. Teachers, especially in their first years of teaching, may be uncertain about how to handle unhappy or critical parents. They may feel uneasy telling anxious parents about their children's problems. This Digest outlines ways to improve communication during parent-teacher conferences. Suggestions are offered to help parents participate more effectively in parent-teacher conferences dealing with children's behavior and learning.

Parent-Teacher Communication

If children are experiencing problems at school, it is important for parents and teachers to share the responsibility for creating a working relationship that fosters children's learning and development. Teachers can encourage open communication by letting parents know when they are available and how they may be contacted, inviting parents to participate in classroom activities, and eliciting parents' concerns and interests prior to a scheduled conference. Parents can introduce themselves early in the school year, letting the teacher know when and how they can be reached and asking how they can begin to become involved in classroom and school activities.

Open and frequent communication between parents and teachers helps to ensure that the issues raised in parent-teacher conferences do not catch anyone by surprise. Both parents and teachers benefit from being well prepared in advance of the meeting so that the meeting is less emotionally charged and takes place in a trusting atmosphere. Assuring parents of confidentiality also helps maintain trust. It may be helpful for both teachers and parents to keep in mind that for many parents, it is a fundamental part of the parenting role to be their child's strongest advocate (Katz, 1995).

Conferences between parents and teachers may become a prime situation for cross-cultural communication or *miscommunication* (Quiroz et al., 1999). For example, if a teacher says that a child is *outstanding* in a subject, some Latino parents may interpret this comment to mean *standing out*—a characteristic considered undesirable by parents from a culture with a more collectivist viewpoint. Asking for clarification of terms and more specific information may help to improve understanding between parents and teachers.

Some schools conduct student-led conferences to provide children with an opportunity to critically examine their work with their parents. However, for students experiencing difficulties, parents may wish to request a conference alone with the teacher.

Addressing Learning Problems

When discussing a child's learning problems with the teacher, parents can try the following strategies:

Consider the Context. Ask the teacher to be specific about the problem and the context in which the problem occurs. Children who experience difficulty in learning may do so for many reasons. They may be experiencing frustrations with peers, with family arrangements, or with specific subjects or learning situations. It may be beneficial for teachers to pinpoint both strengths and weaknesses that the child displays. Parents can then work with teachers to identify specific situations in which the difficulty occurs.

Identify What Helps. Ask the teacher what is being done to help the child overcome the problem. Ideally, the teacher has tried several strategies to help the child overcome the learning problem. Sometimes small steps, such as moving a child to a different place in the room or shortening an assignment, can make a difference. Often children find it difficult to let the teacher know that they do not understand what is expected of them. It may be helpful to have the teacher talk to the child about his or her problem along with the parent.

Make a Plan. Ask the teacher what you can specifically do to help the child at home. With the teacher, list three or four concrete actions to do every day. It may be as simple as a change in the evening schedule so that the child has 15 to 20 minutes of the parent's time to read together or work on math homework. A regular schedule is usually beneficial to a child. A young child might benefit from two shorter periods of work rather than one long session. For example, it may be more effective to learn to spell 3 new words a night than to study 10 or 12 words the night before a test.

Schedule a Follow-up Conference. Before leaving the conference, it is a good idea to agree with the teacher on what is expected of the child, what the teacher will do to help, and what the parent will do. Sometimes it is helpful to involve the child in these decisions so that he or she can see that the teacher and parents are working together to help alleviate the problem. A follow-up conference can be used to review the effectiveness of the plan and to formulate a new plan, if necessary. Scheduling another meeting after 3 to 4 weeks signals to the child that both parents and teachers are highly interested in taking effective steps to help him or her achieve success in learning. This strategy can serve to encourage a child who may have become discouraged from repeated experiences of failure early in the school year.

Addressing Behavior Problems

When addressing their child's behavior problems, parents can try the following strategies:

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Specify the Behavior. Ask the teacher to be specific about the type of misbehavior in which the child engages. Aggressive behavior may be a child's way of getting something from a peer rather than of intentionally bringing harm to another person. Inability to follow directions may be a result of a hearing or language problem rather than evidence of direct defiance of the teacher. It is helpful to consider many possibilities when pinpointing the behavior in question.

Examine the Context. Ask the teacher to help determine when, where, and why the misbehavior is occurring. Try to identify with the teacher any events that may have contributed to a specific incident of misconduct. Try to take into consideration anything that might be contributing to the situation: the influence of peers, time of day, family problems, illness or fatigue, or changes in schedule or after-school activities. Children may be more prone to misconduct when they are tired or irritable.

Examine the Teacher's Expectations. Ask the teacher to be as specific as possible about what a child does that is different from what the teacher expects in a particular situation. Sometimes, if the teacher assumes that a child is being intentionally aggressive, the teacher's expectation of aggressive acts can become part of the problem and can lead to a "recursive cycle" (Katz, 1995) in which children come to fulfill the expectations set for them. Try to determine with the teacher if the child is capable of meeting the teacher's positive expectations.

Make a Plan. Ask the teacher what can be done by both the teacher and the child to help solve the problem. It may be helpful to have the teacher call the parent if the problem happens again, in order to discuss possible solutions. Parents and teachers can look together at alternative short-term solutions. Often very young children may not understand what is expected of them in specific situations and may need added explanations and encouragement to meet a teacher's expectations. When young children understand the procedures to follow to complete a task, they may be better able to act without guidance. Knowing what to expect and what is expected of them increases children's ability to monitor their own behavior.

Plan a Follow-Up Conference. Children are more likely to be concerned about improving their behavior if they believe their parents care about how they behave. When a parent shows enough concern to try a plan of action and then meet again with the teacher to evaluate its effectiveness, the parent sends a strong message to the child that he or she is expected to behave at school. It is sometimes beneficial to include the child in the follow-up conference, too, so that the child can make suggestions. Knowing that parents and teachers care enough to meet repeatedly about a problem may be more motivating than any material reward a child is offered (Kohn, 1993).

When There Are No Concerns: Questions for Parents to Ask Teachers

In some cases, parent-teacher conferences may not be very informative, especially if the teacher reports that the child has no problems. Some parents may repeatedly hear that they "have nothing to worry about." While this may sound reassuring, these parents may come away without the necessary information to help their children continue to make steady progress in school. When parents anticipate such an outcome from a conference, they may want to be prepared to ask some of the following questions:

1. *What does my child do that surprises you?* Very often this question can reveal to parents what expectations the teacher has for the child. Sometimes a child will behave quite differently at school than at home, so the parent may b surprised, as well.
2. *What is my child reluctant to do?* This question may reveal the parents more about the child's interests and dislik than they would ordinarily know. The question may encou age the teacher to talk to the parent about the child's ac demic and social preferences.
3. *What is a goal you would like to see my child achieve?* Th question can serve as a springboard for parents and teac ers to develop a plan to work together to help a child set a reach a specific outcome. Even well-behaved and hig achieving children may benefit from setting goals in are that need improvement or in which they might excel.
4. What can I do at home to support what is being done school? This question is always appreciated. Teachers m have suggestions for parents but may be afraid to offer u solicited advice. The question helps create a team feelin

Conclusion

Effective parent-teacher conferences take place in an atmosphe of trust, where confidentiality is ensured and parents and teac ers treat each other with respect. When children have learning behavioral problems, it may be helpful to examine the context which they occur and then to formulate a plan of action. Som times it is helpful to include the child in setting goals and revie ing the effectiveness of plans. Children are more likely to su ceed in school if they can view their parents and teachers wo ing together cooperatively.

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Children's Extracurricular Activities

Peggy Patten

Our AskERIC service (*askeric@askeric.org*) responds to many questions related to children's extracurricular activities. Does athletic involvement help or hinder academic achievement? Are formal music lessons a good idea for children? Do young children benefit from second language instruction? There is some research to support children's involvement in learning a foreign language, participating in athletics, and studying music—including research that points to the positive effect on children's academic achievement.

Research suggests that knowing a second language gives children many advantages. In addition to developing a lifelong ability to communicate with more people and a competitive advantage in the workforce, many children who receive second language instruction perform better on cognitive and verbal tests than those who speak only one language (Martin, 1999).

Participation in sports seems to confer many social, academic, and health advantages for youth. The May 5, 1999, issue of *Education Week* reported on recent research on high school students, sports, and school success. In one study, the more involved that 10th-graders were in athletics, the more likely they were to feel confident of their academic abilities or to be engaged in their schools. A second study looked at the frequency of behavior problems among 12th-graders who had participated in athletics at some point in their high school careers and found that sports participation had a positive impact. The effects were twice as strong for black males as they were for white females. Other groups of students fell somewhere in between ("Sports and School Success," 1999).

In experiments exploring the link between music and intelligence, researchers Frances Rauscher and her colleagues at the University of California, Irvine, found that music training—either singing or keyboard lessons—can enhance spatial reasoning (Rauscher, 1995). Spatial reasoning, Rauscher says, is important to success in a variety of academic subjects such as math, the sciences, and engineering.

Much has been written about the benefits of various extracurricular activities for children. Should parents sign their children up for as many activities as early as possible? Not necessarily. In thinking about the many valuable experiences available to children, balance and moderation are important.

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Applying for College Financial Aid

According to the nation's largest source of college student aid, the U.S. Department of Education, applying for federal student financial aid this year is easier and faster than ever before—thanks to a streamlined federal application and improved electronic filing.

Potential applicants may find the following facts useful:

- Applying for financial aid is free. Filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)—electronically or on a paper application—is the first step in the process.
- Electronic filing is faster, less error prone. FAFSA on the Web is available at http://www.fafsa.ed.gov.
- The paper application is shorter, easier. The paper application for the 1999-2000 school year has been cut in half—from 16 pages down to 8—and it has been redesigned to make it easier to complete.
- Reapplying for aid has been simplified. Most of the information given by an individual student on the 1998-1999 application will be the same. This year, students can reapply electronically.

In addition to federal grants and loans, families can take advantage of education tax credits beginning this year: the $1,500 HOPE Scholarship for the first 2 years of college or vocational school and the $1,000 Lifetime Learning tax credit for those beyond the first 2 years of college or who are taking classes part-time to improve or upgrade their job.

To take advantage of these tax credits, taxpayers must complete and submit IRS form 8863 with their federal tax return. For more information, call the IRS help line at 800-829-1040 or visit the U.S. Treasury Department's Web site at http://www.irs.ustreas.gov.

Adapted from a July-August 1999 online *Parent News* article (http://npin.org/pnews/1999/pnew799/int799b.html).

About NPIN and *Parent News Offline*

The National Parent Information Network (NPIN) was created in late 1993 to collect and disseminate information about high-quality resources for parents by the U.S. Department of Education, which supports NPIN through the ERIC system. NPIN is now one of the largest noncommercial collections of parenting information on the Internet (http://npin.org). In addition to its Web site, NPIN offers question-answering services via a toll-free telephone number (800-583-4135) and by email through the AskERIC service (askeric@askeric.org).

Another service provided by NPIN is *Parent News*, an Internet magazine that focuses on topics of interest to parents and professionals who work with parents. Many of the articles featured in *Parent News* have been developed in direct response to frequently asked questions. *Parent News Offline* has been created in response to requests for a newsletter that would introduce those without Internet access to the activities and information available through NPIN. We encourage you to share both our online and offline resources, including ERIC/EECE Digests, with parenting groups, schools, and community initiatives.

Recent Publications

Several new ERIC/EECE and NPIN publications are available that will be of interest to parents and those who work with them:

ERIC/EECE Digests (free two-page reports):

- *Helping Middle School Students Make the Transition into High School*
- *Easing the Teasing: How Parents Can Help Their Children*
- *Video Games: Research, Ratings, Recommendations*
- *Parenting Style and Its Correlates*
- *Television Violence: Content, Context, and Consequences*
- *If an Adolescent Begins to Fail in School, What Can Parents and Teachers Do?*
- *When Retention Is Recommended, What Should Parents Do?*

To order ERIC/EECE publications, call 800-583-4135. Digests are available on our Web site (http://ericeece.org/pubs/digests.html), or they can be ordered online at http://ericeece.org/digorder.html

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